Multilateralism in Tension: Responsibility, Responsiveness, and Tolerance

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Better known for his works on the American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville made insightful remarks concerning the root causes and processes that lead to revolutions: they often occur when the gap between mounting expectations and the political & socioeconomic possibilities of their satisfaction becomes evident. The have-nots tend to unrest in periods of relative prosperity, when rulers lighten the burdens of repression without sufficiently including in the political arena those whose awareness of their marginal condition in society has improved. To understand revolutionary motives thus one has to address both material conditions and perceptions of inequalities. As an old Spanish saying goes, "distant goals reduce close suffering".

These are wise words to start a discussion on the wires that weave interdependencies in current global society. Unlike other polities, the global society is still far from materializing "the idea of civilization" proposed by Todorov, which presupposes an enlarged circle of humanity governed by values of tolerance and responsibility[1]. This shared perception of a global commons acknowledges that human beings belong in a single imagined community, in the sense proposed by Anderson – even if marked by a pale sense of belonging to a group, an identity weaker than others, including the national. It recalls Kant's idea of *common sense,* which has been rephrased and marginally redefined by Habermas in his works on the possibility to build a global public space. Taken seriously, this *idealistic-but-not-utopian* approach focuses on the need to establish the conditions for dialogue and political intercourse among individuals and political communities.

Together, they help constitute the essay of a global political space that we have now, which is still far from a polity. Indeed, particular political cultures struggle to find even the vocabulary to imagine a common future, while the bureaucracies of nation-states have higher vested interests in preserving the uniqueness of their community than in building shared cosmopolitan identities. They agree on keeping disagreements at manageable levels, most of which they used to perpetuate indefinitely.

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[1] See Todorov, 2008.

But somehow state bureaucracies lost control at least of part of the global political agenda: new agents imposed issues such as the protection of the environment, the promotion of human security, and the reduction of inequalities at the global level – which conveys a distinct idea of justice. As the achievements regarding the Millennium Goals have shown, it is possible to build a common agenda despite the particular views on the meaning and implications of facts such as existential threats, gender roles, and poverty.

When it comes to the issue of poverty, it is hard to ignore both its relative nature[2] and the inherent insecurity it engenders at the international level:

> "This problem matters […] to us. The twenty-first century world of material comfort, global travel and economic interdependence will become increasingly vulnerable to these large islands of chaos. And it matters now. As the bottom billion diverges from an increasingly sophisticated world economy, integration will become harder, not easier". [3]

Collier does not sufficiently emphasize, however, that inequalities may trigger political unrest, possibly resulting in organized crime and/or greater opposition to deepening global interdependencies. And disputes may launch processes that challenge international organizations in ways they are unable to respond. The UN failure in producing a credible proposal to manage climate change and the WTO incapacity to end the Doha Round illustrate this phenomenon. It follows that international agents attach high expectations to global governance institutions, whose limitations increase their lack of legitimacy and their need of reform.

Their limitations also point to the convenience to enrich the global public debates in forums such as the G-20 and other parallel spaces for building consensus. A network of observatories concerned with progresses in key global issues, such as reducing inequalities and improving human security, would help enhance both the marginal ameliorations in people's lives and the sense of a shared responsibility to build a better common future for our global society.

Instead of mechanically transferring sovereignty to global institutions (thus fulfilling a Western ideal of a legitimate political process), these networks may help addressing issues as they appear, associating the

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[2] Indeed, it does not suffice to improve one's welfare: one needs also to feel that one is doing reasonably well in comparison to those who are around. And at the global level, the spread of communication technologies and the modernization of transportation infrastructure help accelerating the pace both of interdependence and of people's awareness of what happens anywhere, anytime. As a result, a mounting number of people tend to compare their condition with everyone else's. Sooner or later, even in societies organized on the basis of non-egalitarian values, individuals will request their share of welfare here and now.

[3] See Collier, 2007:3.

efficacy in answering to specific challenges to the authority of those who take responsibility for acting. This may also help engender a widespread dialogue that may respond more effectively to particular threats, such as terrorism and non-proliferation. Finally, it may also help dissociating the essence of political communities from the kinds of acts they may collectively purport.

After all, people's attitudes and deeds may be odious or barbaric; but the majority of individuals are not entirely so. Our common human condition makes us all capable of the most enlightened and generous acts, as well as of the most cruel and merciless ones. As Dower wisely argues,

> "[T]he reasons we humans embrace violence and mass destruction are more convoluted than the war planners or most policy analysts acknowledge, and we ignore this complexity at our peril – however forbidding what this says about us as individuals and societies may be"[4].

And it is the use of violence as a means to solve conflicts that may be reduced and de-legitimized. At the end of the day, individuals all over the world now expect both governments and the global society to act whenever human rights violations appear to be unacceptable, i.e., whenever people do not manage to live in freedom from fear and from want – in the UN formula.

One possible response to this challenge requires taking responsibility for reducing global inequalities at all levels. As Kofi Annan learned during the years as UN Secretary-General, security and welfare are closely related. And a sense of Justice can only develop in a world marked by governments that are both accountable to their people and capable of concerting actions on behalf of multilateral structures that are responsive to human needs. In brief, Annan states five lessons:

> "First, in today's world we are all responsible for each other's security. (…) Second, we are also responsible for each other's welfare. Without a measure of solidarity, no society can be truly stable. (…) Third, both security and prosperity depend on respect for human rights and the rule of law. (…) if our communities are to live in peace we must stress also what unites us: our common humanity and the need for our human dignity and rights to be protected by law. (…) My fourth lesson, therefore, is that governments must be accountable for their actions, in the international as well as the domestic arena. (…) How can states hold each other to account? Only through multilateral institutions. So my final lesson is that those institutions must be organized in a fair and democratic way, giving the poor and the weak some influence over the actions of the rich and the strong."[5]

In a nutshell, these would probably be his answers to the questions raised during the preparation of this

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[4] See Dower, 2010: XXIII.
[5] See Annan, 2006.

seminar. But these answers are obviously politically engaged. Idealistic, they are far from naïve and aim at influencing the political agenda, on behalf of whatever sense of cosmopolitanism may exist at the international realm. Materialized, they would promote a circulation of global political elites that state bureaucracies, particularly in great powers, resist.

However, acting requires evaluating the extent to which policy-makers are open to share a common understanding of what they want from the global society, its governing values, principles, rules, and institutions. And if they reach a consensus on the need for a system of global governance, it follows that such a system ought to be responsive to the demands of those who resent their marginal position in current international society.

To be responsive, any system of governance may be legitimate. This implies bringing societies back in the deliberation of the ideas and norms that shape the actual evolution of the global governance structures. Such participation functions not only as a means to inform decision-making process, but also as an instrument to increase the expectation that major proposals will be implemented by states. After all, in the long run only commitments made at the public arena tend be fulfilled by politicians, particularly in societies where ideas and information flow freely.[6]

We are no longer strangers to each other, which makes things more difficult for governments, as they have trouble shifting responsibilities abroad. But it is also evident that particular cultures are still more relevant for political communities than the cosmopolitan set of beliefs, values, and practices that somewhat help bind together "our global neighborhood" – to recall the thoughtful UN report in the mid-1990s, when expectations pertaining the world order after the Cold War were optimistic.

Rhetorically the US Government, for example, has already acknowledged the need to build "a network of alliances and partnerships, regional organizations and global institutions that is durable and dynamic enough to help us meet today's challenges and adapt to threats that we cannot even conceive of, just as our parents never dreamt of melting glaciers or dirty bombs."[7] But governments shall go beyond rhetoric.

Strengthening the current "Sherpa" system for planning G20 and other informal alliances improves the coordination of expectations and helps creating shared perceptions of possible joint efforts not only to face

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[6] The current inefficacy of Governmental attempts to control flows of information even in countries like China or North Korea increasingly makes both nation states and the global realm a context of this sort.
[7] See Clinton, 2010.

common threats, but also to improve collective capacities to materialize a community of shared civilization based on the values of tolerance and responsibility.

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